

Chronicle-Telegram

Former General Industries building burns



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ELYRIA — One of the biggest fires in Elyria's history threatened its industrial core and nearby neighborhoods Thursday when the former General Industries building burned, leaving a shell stretching for nearly three city blocks. Flames shot 200 feet in the air above the three-story factory at Taylor and Olive streets, which once housed the county's largest custom molder of plastics and was the home of J-Tech, a composite molding company for sinks, tubs and other items.

The fire raged through wooden rafters and bowed brick walls, which crashed onto nearby streets and sent firefighters running.

Burning ash rained on surrounding residential areas, but the fire was largely contained to the near-empty factory, and no one was injured, Acting Fire Chief Joseph Pronesti said.

"Elyria should be proud of their firefighters," Pronesti said. "They saved five residential blocks."

The cause of the blaze — which forced a middle-of-the-night evacuation of residents in the immediate area around the factory — has not been determined.

Investigators from the State Fire Marshal's Office arrived in town Thursday and were waiting for demolition crews to pull down the teetering walls so they could safely poke around inside, said Shane Cartmill, a spokesman for the State Fire Marshal's Office.

Elyria firefighters — supplemented by firefighters and equipment from virtually every area department — spent the day extinguishing hot spots in the building before finally determining it was out at about 6 p.m. — more than 16 hours after they first arrived.

In all, more than 100 firefighters from Lorain, Medina and Cuyahoga counties assisted.

"We're thankful the departments in the area are available and offered their help," Elyria Mayor Bill Grace said.

Sky alight

Firefighters received the first call about the building at 1:40 a.m. Six minutes later — when a shift commander rolled up in a sport-utility vehicle — he found a loading dock engulfed in flames and put out a second alarm.

Within minutes, the fire had spread and by the time Pronesti arrived at 2:14 a.m., fire was burning on all three floors of the building near the loading dock.

He said the century-old factory, which once was owned by the venerable Arthur Garford of automobile fame, had oil-soaked floors that enabled the fire to spread rapidly.

Pronesti said it was clear immediately that the fire was moving too fast to send firefighters inside. Instead, they decided to let it burn out and worked to protect nearby homes and businesses, including Valley Natural Gas at 151 Olive St., which has large outdoor propane and oxygen tanks.

Firefighters from Lorain and Sheffield made it their job to protect that building and the explosive tanks with sheets of water to avert a potential disaster, Pronesti said.

"It would have been bigger fireworks than Elyria has for the Fourth of July," he said.

As the fire raged, resident Ken Fadenholz stood outside, keeping an eye on his home next door to the LifeShare Community Blood Services garage at Taylor and Warren streets as flames darted across Taylor Street.

"If that goes, my house is toast," said Fadenholz, 37, pointing to LifeShare.

But again, firefighters directed their precious supply of water — low water pressure in the area kept it in short supply until outlying departments set up a water shuttle — toward the garage to keep it soaked and safe.

Two windows blew out, the ceiling was damaged and firefighters had to bust in a door, but that was it, said Richard Cluck, LifeShare's chief operating officer.

More importantly, he said, the bloodmobiles stored in the building — worth \$600,000 — weren't damaged.

"If the buses had been destroyed, 60 percent of our blood collection capacity would have gone down the toilet," Cluck said. "Those buses take nine months to manufacture."

Fire last week

Pronesti said the fire started in the loading dock on the building's east side where a fire had broken out June 26.

In the earlier fire, a workman dismantling pipes with a cutting torch probably touched off the blaze and left for lunch without noticing it, according to Assistant Fire Chief Glenn Saddler.

At that time, Saddler lectured a J-Tech workman, saying the entire building could have burned had the fire had taken place at night.

The building, which housed businesses that have employed hundreds over the years, is owned by John Peshek of B Vest Properties, according to Chief Deputy County Auditor Craig Snodgrass. The 85,308-square-foot building sits on 3.8 acres and is valued at \$233,100, he said.

Peshek said Thursday that he doesn't think his work crews were to blame for this fire.

He said he had crews disassembling the dock, but they finished about 5 p.m. Wednesday, and that he was in the building until 9 p.m.

Peshek said he thinks the fire was set.

"We were back there at 9 p.m. last night and didn't see anything," he said. "We were very careful to get the material off the dock. That's what disturbs me — we think somebody did something to set the fire."

Pronesti said it's too soon to say what caused the fire, and investigators won't begin the task of reconstructing what happened until today.

Cartmill — from the fire marshal's office — said despite the devastating fire, investigators still may be able to determine the cause. Trace evidence often remains in buildings that are virtually destroyed, he said.

Cartmill said the investigators are interviewing first responders and residents, and they also will be speaking with Peshek and investigating any possible link between the two fires on the dock.

"Right now, they don't see any evidence to support the theory of arson, but that can change," Cartmill said.

Peshek was to have sold a part of the property to Elyria Plastics Products so it could expand. He said he will consider rebuilding — but not nearly as large as the old building.

"It was bigger than I ever needed, and I couldn't maintain it the way I wanted to," he said. "We're going to try and rebuild and go from there."

Pronesti, meanwhile, said he's always had been worried that a fire could break out in the vast, lumbering building that dates to the turn of the century.

The fire Thursday, he said, probably is the biggest in the city's history at least since a fire in February 1956 burned the old Masonic Temple, a six-story building that stood where the county administration building is now, to the ground.

"I pass this building every day and size it up," Pronesti said of the General Industries facility.

Evacuation & debris

While the building's neighbors learned about the fire firsthand with a knock at the door and a request to leave their home for safety's sake in the middle of the night — others learned about it when they stepped outside in the morning.

Burned ash blew all around, blanketing cars and yards and making for some strange finds. State Rep. Matt Lundy, D-Elyria, who lives on Olive Street, found charred invoices from General Industries in his yard on Thursday morning.

Pronesti said the Fire Department received reports of falling ash from residents living a mile or two away on Elyria's east side.

Ralph Hatfield, who lives about five blocks away from the factory on Roosevelt Avenue, said he went outside to get the newspaper and saw burning ash.

"I had flames falling down on me from the sky," said Hatfield, 71. "If it hadn't been raining, my house probably would have burned down."

Closer to the factory, hundreds of residents were evacuated — many of whom made their way to Eastern Heights Junior High School, where the local chapter of the Red Cross had about 30 workers and volunteers on hand to help families and serve cold drinks — and later muffins and hot dogs — to firefighters.

Despite the urging by officials to leave, some of those living closest to the flaming building refused.

Instead, Gerard and Mary Piovarchy got into their pickup and watched the blaze from their driveway.

"They've been having problems with vandalism," Mary Piovarchy said of the building.

Another neighbor, Debbie Dailey, opted to stay near her home, too, although she said she was ready to dart off on a moment's notice with her boyfriend if things took a turn for the worse.

"I told Peter, 'All I need is you and my cat,' " she said, adding that the building was "an accident waiting to happen.

Staff writer Stephen Szucs contributed to this story.

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